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The Helms affair

RICHARD HELMS, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, is under investigation by the Justice Department on suspicion of having lied to a Senate committee about CIA activities in Chile.

The present director of the CIA, Adm. Stansfield Turner, has expressed concern about the prospect that information damaging to national security may be made public if Helms is indicted and tried on a charge of perjury.

A federal grand jury is known to be looking into the Helms affair. The Carter administration has promised an early decision on whether to prosecute Helms.

Perjury before a Senate committee by any federal official

would be a serious matter but it would be particularly serious if committed by a CIA director in testimony about CIA activities. It would threaten the "check and balance" system of our government if one branch could lie to another branch and get away with it, especially on a matter so serious as this nation's involvement in overthrowing a foreign government.

The principle of absolute accountability must be established for once and all. That is more important than any temporary embarrassment to the CIA resulting from the release of secret information, although such releases should be kept to a minimum.

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